

Poston Block
126, 128, and 130 Public Square
at corner of Main Street
Clarksville
Montgomery County
Tennessee

HABS No. TENN-35

HABS
TENN.
63-CLKSV.
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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. TENN-35

POSTON BLOCK

Location: 126, 128, and 130 Public Square at the corner of Main Street, Clarksville, Montgomery County, Tennessee
Latitude: 36°31'41" Longitude: 87°21'43"

Present Owner: The heirs of Matt Kirk (deceased)

Present Occupant: Torino Cigar Manufacturing Company occupies Numbers 126 and 128. Number 130 is unoccupied, except for a basement room occupied by Mode Hampton.

Present Use: Numbers 126 and 128 serve as a storage house for a cigar manufacturing company. The ground or basement level of Number 130 is used as a plumber's repair shop.

Statement of Significance: This block of three buildings is the oldest surviving structure used for business purposes in Montgomery County, Tennessee. The buildings bear a remarkable resemblance to Philadelphia stores of the mid-nineteenth century. The similarity may be due to the Philadelphia business connections of the merchant for whom the block was built.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1843 or shortly before. A deed dated September 7, 1843, conveying land at the northwest corner of the Public Square from John H. Poston to John F. Coutts and Adeline Poston Coutts refers to the "block of buildings lately erected by John H. Poston."
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The structures were built by John H. Poston on Lot #57, Block #5 of the old plan of Clarksville, which he and his business partner William King had acquired in 1808 from James Huling. The deed of February 23, 1808, specifies one half of Lot #57 "Fronting Main from the River to the present courthouse and running on the Public Square and Spring Street half the length of said lot #57, 1/4 acre" for \$50. Poston became sole owner of the lot in 1815, upon the death of William King.

In September 1843 Poston deeded land at the northwest corner of Public Square, Lot #57 "to John F. Coutts and wife Adeline Poston Coutts 'for natural love and affection.'" Adeline was Poston's daughter, and the property appears to have been a wedding gift to the couple.

Coutts opened a grocery store in the corner building of the block. The middle store, #128, was used as a grocery by Beaumont, Payne, & Co. The third building, #126, was the clothing store of A. B. Harrison. Coutts continued in the grocery business for only two years, and then entered the furniture business. His furniture business continued on this site until 1872.

John F. Coutts died intestate in 1897. His property was divided among his three children--C. F. Coutts, Mrs. Jessie C. Beach, and Mrs. Gertrude C. Hopkins. C. F. Coutts mortgaged his one-third interest to A. Howell. This mortgage was foreclosed, with W. E. Beach becoming the purchaser on May 31, 1909. W. E. Beach and two daughters deeded the property to Matt Kirk on July 29, 1938.

4. Original plans and construction: The buildings appear to have changed little, being of the same plan and construction today as when they were erected c. 1843.
5. Alterations and additions: Since 1872, due to a decline in business in the vicinity, the buildings have been leased or rented for various purposes--most often storage. Some interior frame partitions on the second floor have been installed to accommodate the needs of individual tenants. /Almost gutted by fire in 1975; renovated in 1976./

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

John H. Poston was born in 1786 in Charles County, Maryland. When he was eight years old, his family moved to Washington County, Virginia. Poston went to Clarksville, Tennessee, in 1805, when he was nineteen, as a young merchant acting for William King. When King died in 1808, Poston was a partner in his large estate in Tennessee. Active in civic, financial, church, and political affairs of the growing river town, he became an officer in the local militia in 1809, an alderman in 1819, and--also in 1819--one of the Commissioners of the Red River Bridge Company. He was a part of the group that chartered the Clarksville Male Academy in 1820, and the Clarksville Female Academy sixteen years later.

In 1830 Poston was elected Mayor of Clarksville. In 1835 he became the Founder-President of the Branch Bank of Tennessee in Clarksville; he was also the founder of the Clarksville Marine Insurance and Trust Company. In 1836 he was appointed

Postmaster. Poston was a generous contributor to the Methodist Church and to various local charities. In addition to his many business interests, he was also a large landholder.

Poston's son-in-law, John Franklin Coutts--who owned the block until 1897 and operated his grocery store in the northernmost building--was a successful furniture dealer and undertaker. A large sign, dating from around 1870 and advertising his furniture and undertaking business, is still visible--painted on the end wall of the block so that it might be seen by river traffic. One could buy coffins as well as furniture in his store.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Mrs. Ursula Beach, the county historian of Montgomery County, Clarksville, Tennessee.

Register of Deeds, Montgomery County, Clarksville, Tennessee.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Beach, Ursula Smith. Along the Warioto. Nashville: McQuiddy Press, 1964.

Titus, W. P. Picturesque Clarksville Past and Present. Clarksville: W. P. Titus, 1887, pp. 274-75.

Prepared by John W. Kiser
Architectural Historian
National Park Service
Summer 1971

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This block of three buildings is the oldest surviving structure used for business purposes in Montgomery County. The buildings show a remarkable resemblance to Philadelphia stores of the mid-nineteenth century. The similarity may be due to Philadelphia business connections of the original owner.
2. Condition of fabric: Fair.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: This rectangular block measures 59'-7" (three units, each with three-bay front) x 45'-1". Each building has two stories and a full basement. Since the hilly site drops toward the west, the basement is exposed to a large extent on the north elevation, and is fully exposed on the west (rear) elevation.
2. Foundations: Tennessee limestone.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: Load-bearing masonry walls of English-bonded brick. The north gable end is painted with the words "J. F. Coutts' Son, Furniture & Undertaking, Est. 1845." along with an advertisement for "Uneda Biscuit."
4. Chimneys: There are five brick interior chimneys.
5. Porches: A stairway rises to a platform outside the first-floor entrance in the rear facade of the south building.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: A wooden frontispiece on the first-floor facade of each building consists of three openings separated by wooden columns whose plinth-block bases rest on a stone sill and whose capitals support a continuous wooden lintel across the three buildings. Each opening contains a set of double wooden doors with a straight transom above. The set of doors in the most northerly and the most southerly of these openings is entirely wooden--each leaf having two panels (a large panel above and a smaller panel below). The other doors in the main facade contain one, two, or six lights with a wooden panel below. The transoms contain one, two, or three lights. On the north (end) elevation there is a recessed center entrance at the basement level. In the rear elevation of each building there is a door opening at the basement level--containing louvered doors--and also a door opening at the first-floor level (the first-floor doorway of the center building has been partially bricked in on the outside; a small window has been inserted in the upper part of the opening). The rear doors have stone sills.
 - b. Windows and shutters: On the main facade of each building there are three square-headed window openings at the second-floor level. Each opening contains nine-over-nine-light double-hung wooden sash. The double windows on the first-floor north facade contain two-

over-two-light double-hung wooden sash and share a common sill and lintel. At the rear there is a single window on the first-floor level of each building which contains twelve-over-eight-light double-hung wooden sash; the two windows on the second-floor level of each building have nine-over-nine-light double-hung sash, and the window at the basement level of each building has six-over-six-light double-hung sash. In general, the lintels and sills are wooden.

7. Roof: Simple pitched roofs with gable ends. The north gable end has a stepped parapet. The easternmost and westernmost steps of the parapet rest on stone corbels. The fire walls between the buildings rise above the surface of the roof.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: Each of the three basements consists of a single space with an interior door leading from one basement to the next.
 - b. First floor: One of the front entrances in each building opens into a small vestibule containing the stairway to the second floor. A doorway from the vestibule opens into the one-room open space of the first floor. The south and central buildings interconnect at this level.
 - c. Second floor: The second floors consist of two rooms-- a large front room and a smaller back room. The stairway is against a side wall of the front room. The south and central buildings interconnect on the second floor.
2. Stairways: Each building contains stairs to the second story and to the basement. The stairway to the second floor ascends from the small vestibule at the front of the building.
 3. Flooring: Hardwood flooring has recently been laid over the hand-hewn floor joists. The latter are, on the average, eleven inches by three inches, twenty inches on center.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are painted plaster on masonry bearing walls. The ceiling is painted plaster on wooden lathe.
 5. Doorways and doors: There are two- and four-panel wooden doors.

6. Lighting: Electricity.
7. Heating: Each floor has a fireplace in a projecting chimney breast. Typically, the fireplace is round-arched with cast-iron surround, to which a fire grate was once attached. A simple wooden chimney piece has pilasters on plinth-block bases and simple capitals--with architrave, frieze, cornice, and simple mantel shelf above.

D. Site:

The structure is situated on a hilly site with its main facade facing east on the Public Square and its rear facade overlooking the Cumberland River to the west.

Prepared by Roy C. Pledger
Supervisory Architect
National Park Service
July 1971

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were made during the summer of 1971 as part of a cooperative project of the National Park Service, the Tennessee Historical Commission, and the Historic Sites Federation of Tennessee. The work represented the second phase of an extensive recording program to document the historic architecture of Middle Tennessee and involved the recording of structures in the counties surrounding Nashville.

The project was under the direction of James C. Massey, at that time Chief of the Historic American Buildings Survey. Supervisor of the recording team was Prof. Roy C. Pledger of Texas A&M University. The team was composed of John W. Kiser, Architectural Historian (University of Tennessee); Daryl P. Fortier, Architect (University of Minnesota); and student architects Gilbert M. Glaubinger (Rhode Island School of Design), Steve P. Roberts (Ohio State University), and Barry S. Williams (Texas A&M University). Photographs were made by Jack E. Boucher, HABS staff photographer.

Addendum to:

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REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

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